



Arriving At Theory in Time

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My journey to understanding theoretical discourse occurred on a Friday. A morning like any other, it was during the postcolonial lecture when I arrived at the same conclusion as the theorist, even before encountering their work in the prescribed reading for class, that I realized – I had *internalized* theory. I learned two things that day. First, internalizing theory requires more than exposure to the context and core ideas of the theory. It necessitates time and introspection. Second, this epiphanic moment is unlikely to occur regularly or organically in the constraints of an academic semester.

The anecdote underscores the modern learner's dilemma with how theory is taught. Within the academic semester, time becomes a scarce commodity. The syllabi are packed, and so are deadlines. Within the confines of a semester, educators face the challenge of fostering this growth within a compressed time frame. Apart from time, arriving at theory is impeded then, simply by curriculum and pedagogy. I will illustrate this in due course.

The complexities of dissecting pedagogical paradigms cannot be overlooked. This, however, is dictated primarily by the curriculum. The curriculum offers learners a sequential ordering of syllabi, building on foundational concepts before introducing modern theories. While this does structure thought, it limits a learner's exploration while obscuring contemporary relevance. For instance, the syllabus that dictates my academic semester follows the order where we begin with Plato, Aristotle, and Arnold before moving on to modern thinkers like Eliot. This pattern prioritizes historical chronology over exploring interconnected ideas between theorists or even the development of the same theoretical idea across time.

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Rather than adhering to organizing theory in a linear progression through history, thematic divisions would facilitate an approach where key concepts are explored while being exposed to different theoretical perspectives that have approached the same themes throughout history. Apart from connecting ideas across time, it also animates the subject to remain relevant to contemporary times.

Moreover, the influence of Bloom's Taxonomy in formulating a curriculum has fundamentally altered the nature of the discipline. It commodifies theory to the marketability of each concept taught. How does one assess theoretical knowledge? Surely, applying X theory to Y text does not evaluate critical thinking skills. In reducing theory to a set of skills to be mastered and assessed, the subject is relegated to projects and assignments. This undermines the nature of theory. The curriculum not only dictates the content of theory but also changes the ontology of the discipline, altering the learner's experience and how it is taught.

Pedagogy, on the other hand, needs to provide a conducive environment to arrive at theory. It fails to aid engagement or critical reflection. Theory is often disseminated in vacuum. Learners often have no contextual understanding, causing theory to become an abstract concept devoid of history, culture, or politics. There are no realizations or discoveries; theory is simply encountered as an intellectual exercise with neither stimulation nor a lens through which to interrogate and understand the world. This lack of contextualization not only diminishes the inherent value of theory but relegates it to a rote memorisation of disconnected ideas.

The absence of classroom discussions also exacerbates this problem. With no discussions, lectures become a monologue instead of a dialogue. This makes theory axiomatic. An axiomatic approach only calls for regurgitation, an uncritical acceptance, rather than a dynamic framework for interpretation and analysis. Without discussions, learners have no space for intellectual exchange or to question or challenge assumptions. Passive learning stifles any curiosity for the subject, and a mechanical exercise of application follows the course. Theory, then, is a tool instead of a mode of inquiry.

Furthermore, dissonance between theory and praxis is evident in pedagogy. Complex theoretical frameworks are reduced to tools for textual analysis. Learners are often tasked with applying theory. For instance, applying postcolonial theory to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* divorces theory of transcending textual interpretation. It must aid in fostering inquiry and reflection.

The pedagogical impediments to arriving at theory call for a shift in approach to teaching literary theory. Educators can cultivate a generation of critical thinkers and equip them to become cultural critics in an ecosystem that contextualizes and reconceptualizes theory as a dynamic and iterative process. Only then can theory truly be internalized, transcending the boundaries of academia to become a guiding principle. I believe that arriving at theory is not merely a destination but a process—a journey that continues long after the semester's end.